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Summary:

This resource presents methods for adding sentence variety and complexity to writing that may sound repetitive or boring. Sections are divided into general tips for varying structure, a discussion of sentence types, and specific parts of speech which can aid in sentence variety.

Strategies for Variation

Adding sentence variety to prose can give it life and rhythm. Too many sentences with the same structure and length can grow monotonous for readers. Varying sentence style and structure can also reduce repetition and add emphasis. Long sentences work well for incorporating a lot of information, and short sentences can often maximize crucial points. These general tips may help add variety to similar sentences.

1. Vary the rhythm by alternating short and long sentences.

Several sentences of the same length can make for bland writing. To enliven paragraphs, write sentences of different lengths. This will also allow for effective emphasis.

Example:

The Winslow family visited Canada and Alaska last summer to find some native American art. In Anchorage stores they found some excellent examples of soapstone carvings. But they couldn't find a dealer selling any of the woven wall hangings they wanted. They were very disappointed when they left Anchorage empty-handed.

Revision:

The Winslow family visited Canada and Alaska last summer to find some native American art, such as soapstone carvings and wall hangings. Anchorage stores had many soapstone items available. Still, they were disappointed to learn that wall hangings, which they had especially wanted, were difficult to find. Sadly, they left empty-handed.

Example:

Many really good blues guitarists have all had the last name King. They have been named Freddie King and Albert King and B.B. King. The name King must make a bluesman a really good bluesman. The bluesmen named King have all been very talented and good guitar

players. The claim that a name can make a guitarist good may not be that far-fetched.

Revision:

What makes a good bluesman? Maybe, just maybe, it's all in a stately name. B.B. King. Freddie King. Albert King. It's no coincidence that they're the royalty of their genre. When their fingers dance like court jesters, their guitars gleam like scepters, and their voices bellow like regal trumpets, they seem almost like nobility. Hearing their music is like walking into the throne room. They really are kings.

2. Vary sentence openings.

If too many sentences start with the same word, especially *The*, *It*, *This*, or *I*, prose can grow tedious for readers, so changing opening words and phrases can be refreshing. Below are alternative openings for a fairly standard sentence. Notice that different beginnings can alter not only the structure but also the emphasis of the sentence. They may also require rephrasing in sentences before or after this one, meaning that one change could lead to an abundance of sentence variety.

Example:

The biggest coincidence that day happened when David and I ended up sitting next to each other at the Super Bowl.

Possible Revisions:

- Coincidentally, David and I ended up sitting right next to each other at the Super Bowl.
- In an amazing coincidence, David and I ended up sitting next to each other at the Super Bowl.
- Sitting next to David at the Super Bowl was a tremendous coincidence.
- But the biggest coincidence that day happened when David and I ended up sitting next to each other at the Super Bowl.
- When I sat down at the Super Bowl, I realized that, by sheer coincidence, I was directly next to David.
- By sheer coincidence, I ended up sitting directly next to David at the Super Bowl.
- With over 50,000 fans at the Super Bowl, it took an incredible coincidence for me to end up sitting right next to David.
- What are the odds that I would have ended up sitting right next to David at the Super Bowl?
- David and I, without any prior planning, ended up sitting right next to each other at the Super Bowl.
- Without any prior planning, David and I ended up sitting right next to each other at the Super Bowl.
- At the crowded Super Bowl, packed with 50,000 screaming fans, David and I ended up sitting right next to each other by sheer coincidence.
- Though I hadn't made any advance arrangements with David, we ended up sitting right next to each other at the Super Bowl.
- Many amazing coincidences occurred that day, but nothing topped sitting right next to David at the Super Bowl.
- Unbelievable, I know, but David and I ended up sitting right next to each other at the Super Bowl.

- Guided by some bizarre coincidence, David and I ended up sitting right next to each other at the Super Bowl.

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Sentence Types

Structurally, English sentences can be classified four different ways, though there are endless constructions of each. The classifications are based on the number of independent and dependent clauses a sentence contains. An independent clause forms a complete sentence on its own, while a dependent clause needs another clause to make a complete sentence. By learning these types, writers can add complexity and variation to their sentences.

Simple sentence: A sentence with one independent clause and no dependent clauses.

- My aunt enjoyed taking the hayride with you.
- China's Han Dynasty marked an official recognition of Confucianism.

Compound Sentence: A sentence with multiple independent clauses but no dependent clauses.

- The clown frightened the little girl, and she ran off screaming.
- The Freedom Riders departed on May 4, 1961, and they were determined to travel through many southern states.

Complex Sentence: A sentence with one independent clause and at least one dependent clause.

- After Mary added up all the sales, she discovered that the lemonade stand was 32 cents short.
- While all of his paintings are fascinating, Hieronymus Bosch's triptychs, full of mayhem and madness, are the real highlight of his art.

Complex-Compound Sentence: A sentence with multiple independent clauses and at least one dependent clause.

- *Catch-22* is widely regarded as Joseph Heller's best novel, and because Heller served in World War II, which the novel satirizes, the zany but savage wit of the novel packs an extra punch.

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For Short, Choppy Sentences

If your writing contains lots of short sentences that give it a choppy rhythm, consider these tips.

1. Combine Sentences With Conjunctions:

Join complete sentences, clauses, and phrases with conjunctions:

and, but, or, nor, yet, for, so

Example: Doonesbury cartoons satirize contemporary politics. Readers don't always find this funny. They demand that newspapers not carry the strip.

Revision: Doonesbury cartoons laugh at contemporary politicians, but readers don't always find this funny and demand that newspapers not carry the strip.

2. Link Sentences Through Subordination:

Link two related sentences to each other so that one carries the main idea and the other is no longer a complete sentence (subordination). Use connectors such as the ones listed below to show the relationship.

after, although, as, as if, because, before, even if, even though, if, if only, rather than, since, that, though, unless, until, when, where, whereas, wherever, whether, which, while

Example: The campus parking problem is getting worse. The university is not building any new garages.

Revision: The campus parking problem is getting worse because the university is not building any new garages.

Example: The US has been highly dependent on foreign oil for many years. Alternate sources of energy are only now being sought.

Revision: Although the US has been highly dependent on foreign oil for many years, alternate sources are only now being sought.

Notice in these examples that the location of the clause beginning with the dependent marker (the connector word) is flexible. This flexibility can be useful in creating varied rhythmic patterns over the course of a paragraph.

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For Repeated Subjects or Topics

Handling the same topic for several sentences can lead to repetitive sentences. When that happens, consider using these parts of speech to fix the problem.

1. Relative pronouns

Embed one sentence inside the other using a clause starting with one of the relative pronouns listed below.

which, who, whoever, whom, that, whose

Example: Indiana used to be mainly an agricultural state. It has recently attracted more industry.

Revision: Indiana, which used to be mainly an agricultural state, has recently attracted more industry.

Example: One of the cameras was not packed very well. It was damaged during the move.

Revision: The camera that was not packed very well was damaged during the move.

Example: The experiment failed because of Murphy's Law. This law states that if something can go wrong, it will.

Revision: The experiment failed because of Murphy's Law, which states that if something can go wrong, it will.

Example: Doctor Ramirez specializes in sports medicine. She helped my cousin recover from a basketball injury.

Revision 1: Doctor Ramirez, who specializes in sports medicine, helped my cousin recover from a basketball injury.

Revision 2: Doctor Ramirez, whose specialty is sports medicine, helped my cousin recover from a basketball injury.

2. Participles

Eliminate a be verb (am, is, was, were, are) and substitute a participle:

Present participles end in -ing, for example: speaking, carrying, wearing, dreaming.

Past participles usually end in -ed, -en, -d, -n, or -t but can be irregular, for example: worried, eaten, saved, seen, dealt, taught.

Example: Wei Xie was surprised to get a phone call from his sister. He was happy to hear her voice again.

Revision 1: Wei Xie, surprised to get a phone call from his sister, was happy to hear her voice again.

Revision 2: Surprised to get a phone call from his sister, Wei Xie was happy to hear her voice again.

3. Prepositions

Turn a sentence into a prepositional phrase using one of the words below:

about, above, across, after, against, along, among, around, as, behind, below, beneath, beside, between, by, despite, down, during, except, for, from, in, inside, near, next to, of, off, on, out, over, past, to, under, until, up, with

Example: The university has been facing pressure to cut its budget. It has eliminated funding for important programs. (two independent clauses)

Revision: Under pressure to cut its budget, the university has eliminated funding for

important programs. (prepositional phrase, independent clause)

Example: Billy snuck a cookie from the dessert table. This was against his mother's wishes.

Revision: Against his mother's wishes, Billy snuck a cookie from the dessert table.

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For Similar Sentence Patterns or Rhythms

When several sentences have similar patterns or rhythms, try using the following kinds of words to shake up the writing.

1. Dependent markers

Put clauses and phrases with the listed dependent markers at the beginning of some sentences instead of starting each sentence with the subject:

after, although, as, as if, because, before, even if, even though, if, in order to, since, though, unless, until, whatever, when, whenever, whether, and while

Example: The room fell silent when the TV newscaster reported the story of the earthquake.

Revision: When the TV newscaster reported the story of the earthquake, the room fell silent.

Example: Thieves made off with Edvard Munch's *The Scream* before police could stop them.

Revision: Before police could stop them, thieves made off with Edvard Munch's *The Scream*.

2. Transitional words and phrases

Vary the rhythm by adding transitional words at the beginning of some sentences:

accordingly, after all, afterward, also, although, and, but, consequently, despite, earlier, even though, for example, for instance, however, in conclusion, in contrast, in fact, in the meantime, in the same way, indeed, just as... so, meanwhile, moreover, nevertheless, not only... but also, now, on the contrary, on the other hand, on the whole, otherwise, regardless, shortly, similarly, specifically, still, that is, then, therefore, though, thus, yet

Example: Fast food corporations are producing and advertising bigger items and high-fat combination meals. The American population faces a growing epidemic of obesity.

Revision: Fast food corporations are producing and advertising bigger items and high-fat combination meals. Meanwhile, the American population faces a growing epidemic of obesity.

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